

On This Day – The Lincoln-Douglas Debates

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Life as we know it today differs significantly from life in 1858. Due to its controversial nature, slavery, while still legal in 1858, divided the nation. It was in this setting that two men, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas ran for the Illinois seat in the United States Senate. The winner of the election would gain control of the Senate for his party. Douglas, a Democrat, agreed to debate with Lincoln, a professional lawyer and Republican, in order to inform the voters of each man's viewpoint regarding the key issues of the campaign.

One debate of particular importance took place in Freeport, Illinois on August 27, 1858. Lincoln, while debating in Freeport, a city known for its abolitionists, made sure he touched on the real issue, slavery. Lincoln believed it was immoral to own slaves and wanted to convince the voters that slavery was unconstitutional. Unlike Lincoln, Douglas, a powerful and well-known politician, supported slavery and accused Northerners of exaggerating the anti-slavery issue. Although most believe Lincoln did not come out ahead in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, he never wavered in his belief that slavery was wrong and should be abolished. This idea would eventually evolve into freedom for all slaves.

When Douglas agreed to debate Lincoln, he proposed that one event should take place in each of the nine Congressional Districts of Illinois, excluding Chicago and Springfield. Freeport, the Second Illinois Congressional District, is located in the far northwestern corner of Illinois, was chosen as the site for the second, and ultimately most

important, debate. On August 17, 1858, Freeport's population of 5,000 tripled to 15,000 with curious onlookers eagerly awaiting the debate. Not even the bad weather could keep the crowds from traveling from miles around to watch Lincoln and Douglas square off regarding the legality of slavery.

As the debate began, Lincoln's objective was to take a strong offensive stance since he was criticized for being too defensive in the first debate which was in Ottawa, Illinois. Douglas posed many questions at the end of the Ottawa debate. Lincoln took his turn in Freeport answering those same questions. After answering the questions posed by Douglas, Lincoln responded with some of his own questions. The second question posed to Douglas proved the most significant in determining the ultimate outcome of the debate. Lincoln, knowing full well that Douglas supported the territories' right to govern themselves, asked whether the people of a territory could exclude slavery, given the validity of the Dred Scott decision, in which the United States Supreme Court ruled that black Americans were not considered citizens of the United States and Congress had no power to outlaw slavery in specific states. With this question, Lincoln essentially set a trap for Douglas. If Douglas answered "yes," he would be supporting the possibility of anti-slavery legislation, something he clearly did not favor. If he answered "no," he would be criticizing the Dred Scott decision, which had already become law. However, blinded by Lincoln's question, Douglas replied that a state could outlaw slavery through legislation regardless of the Dred Scott decision. This statement drew harsh criticism from Southerners and eventually became known as the Freeport Doctrine. While he won the debate, Douglas became known by these comments about slavery and eventually lost the Southerners' support.

Aside from their differing viewpoints on slavery, the two men differed in both appearance and lifestyle. Lincoln's tall and thin frame towered over Douglas' short and stocky stature. Lincoln's clothing often looked rumpled, while Douglas always appeared impeccably dressed. Even Lincoln's high and thin voice contrasted with Douglas' deep and smooth one. Douglas, having considerably more money than Lincoln, traveled in a first-class manner, while Lincoln took advantage of whatever transportation was available. In addition, the debates brought focus on the contrast in personalities between the two men. Douglas, a popular politician of the time, possessed a strong presence and conveyed great confidence and energy during the debate; on the other hand, Lincoln appeared unsophisticated, unsure of himself, and sometimes even awkward. However, when Lincoln spoke about an issue of great importance to him, he conveyed honesty and integrity. His humble nature and pleasant sense of humor earned the respect of many spectators. The people knew that they could count on Lincoln, knowing that he always spoke the truth.

Although Lincoln did not win election to the U. S. Senate, his debates with Douglas paved the way for Lincoln's future success in politics. Lincoln earned the respect of the people with his humble and honest style. Further, he proved a worthy opponent for Douglas especially during the Freeport debate by highlighting the contrast between the law and the immorality of slavery. This set the stage for Lincoln's presidential policy and ultimately for freedom of all slaves. [From Jack Allen, *Teacher's Guide for American Society*; Paul Angle, *Created Equal?*; Allan Carpenter, *Land of Lincoln*; Richard Allen Heckman, *Lincoln vs. Douglas*; Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of*

Lincoln; and Saul Sigelschiffer, *The American Conscience – The Drama of the Lincoln – Douglas Debates.*]